

simmer by lesbianrobin

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Summary:

Steve's chest rises and falls with a sickening stuttered rhythm. His face shines, soaked with sweat, and Will remembers what it looks like wet with blood. Sweat is just as horrifying. Steve's enemy is no longer one that he can beat back with his fists, with a weapon in his hands and a loyal troop at his back. This time, the danger is coming from within. Will envisions strong, tanned hands grasping desperately at his own thin, pale fingers, imagines holding on as Steve mumbles and shakes in fever-induced delirium, thinks about how he would be the constant, the lighthouse on Steve's dark ocean as he fought back the infection and came clawing back into reality. After a long, sleepless night, Steve would blink his eyes open, looking first at the hand enfolded in his own, eyes following the arm up to find Will, the silent sentinel, by his side through it all. He would smile, an exhausted, exuberant grin, eyes shining with devotion, opening his mouth to say —

"You're insane."

Jonathan heaves a long-suffering sigh, the same one Will hears every time they stop for gas and Jonathan sees the prices. "I've taken care of Will a dozen times when he came down with something just like this, I know what I'm doing."

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"Steve isn't your little brother, though, he's—"

"I know that!"

"Do you know that? Because you're kind of acting like you're in charge of him or something."

"I... I'm not acting like anything, Robin, I'm just telling you what I know is right."

"Oh, because you always do what's right, huh, Byers?"

"What is that supposed to—"

"Guys, shh!" Will interrupts, frowning and tilting his head at the

couch, where Steve is slumped over and starting to stir. His fuzzy He-Man blanket has started to slip off of his shoulders.

"Sorry," Jonathan says. He and Robin continue to talk, voices hushed and intense.

Will tries to remember where he left off. They had shipped out to the European countryside, marched through miles and miles of once-picturesque farmland now devastated by the horrors of war. Survived weeks in the trenches. Shared cigarettes and dreams under a sky full of stars. Steve had come down with something, a mysterious and deadly fever, and they were in an infirmary tent. Steve had just been waking up, Will recalls, about to say... about to say... Shit, Will can't remember what he was gonna have Steve say! It was gonna be something really good, too. Something to express his fondness and longing without being too forward or too revealing, because these are dangerous times and there are a million and one reasons why they can never truly be together (one of which being that Will refuses to cross that particular fantasy threshold with somebody he actually knows), and a bomb could drop any day and tear them away from one another forever, and then where would they be? Brokenhearted and alone on the Western Front. Hell on earth without a hand to hold.

"Can you just let me do this?"

Will sighs. Jonathan's voice really just kills the whole damn mood. Maybe he needs to try a different one.

Like, maybe Steve is a moonshiner or a bank robber on the lam, and he caught a bullet last week on a job gone wrong. Will managed to get him to safety and stop the bleeding, but Steve's been slowly succumbing to infection ever since because he refuses to heed Will's advice and go to a hospital. Soon, Will is going to have to turn Steve in, because he'd rather see him be safe and alive behind bars than watch him die in their drafty old hideout. Steve doesn't deserve to die like that. He'll take the money and leave a note in the dead of night, pressing a kiss to Steve's sweaty forehead and promising to use the money to come back and bust him out once he's healed, leaving with a wistful backwards glance before flagging down a lawman in the nearest town and giving him an urgent tip.

This one always makes Will kind of sad. It always ends in a shootout or an electric chair. That's the beauty of Bonnie and Clyde, though, the kind of love that burns like a comet, so bright and hot that it just can't last. Will thinks about *The Outsiders*, but Steve is more of a Sodapop or a Dally than a Johnny (Jonathan being Darry, of course, the parental older brother looking after Will's Ponyboy). *The Outsiders* only really works with random boys from school. Nobody Will knows really fits as Johnny. That one always makes Will cry anyways because it feels a little too real, and he can't go for it with other people in the room, so there's no reason to even consider it. Technically, Robin and Jonathan are in the kitchen arguing over an assortment of containers (some juice, some spices, some whiskey), but there's no wall between the kitchen and the den where Will is watching Steve sleep, so it counts.

Maybe he needs to go further back. Steve could have the plague. But that would mean Will has to wear a robe and one of those creepy masks, and he doesn't think that Steve could make a miraculous recovery, and the middle ages in Europe were kind of extremely gross, so that's a nope. Will glances at the TV to find a rerun of *Little House on the Prairie*.

That'll do. Steve would look really good in a plaid button-down. Actual Steve would never work on a farm, because having soft hands and smooth skin is far too important to Actual Steve for him to spend that much time working out in the sun, but Actual Steve isn't the same as Fantasy Steve. Fantasy Steve is just kind of whoever he needs to be. In this case, Fantasy Steve used to be a city boy, but after losing his parents in a tragic accident and being left with no money and no connections, he decided to try his luck out on the Great Plains. He took Will on as a farmhand for the harvest, but grew attached and decided to keep him around for permanent help. Steve built their modest house with his own two hands, but Will made it into a home, and they spent countless nights together laughing over dinner, bickering over who would go outside to fetch more firewood and sharing their wildest dreams.

Now, Will has found himself in charge of both the farm and Steve's life. As terrifying as it is, as much as Will wants Steve to be okay, he almost enjoys the responsibility. Will is his own man. He's proved

everyone wrong— he isn't just some dumb kid. The crops are tended. The horses are healthy. There's wood in the stove and food on the table. When Steve (just barely) recovers, he'll look Will in the eyes and shake his hand, making him an equal partner in the farm.

Actual Steve groans softly. His hair looks a little more limp than usual.

"Hey," he wheezes, and Will glances into the kitchen. Jonathan and Robin didn't hear it.

"Hey," Will responds softly, getting up out of his chair to sit on the opposite end of the sofa, facing Steve.

"What are they fighting about?"

"You," Will responds, immediately kicking himself. He really needs to work on his bedside manner.

"Oh," Steve says, frowning. "Can you tell them I said to play nice or go home?"

"I don't think they want to hear that."

"You're a brave kid, tell them anyway."

"Not a kid," Will mutters as he stands and turns toward the kitchen.

Jonathan is stirring something in a pot on the stove. Robin doesn't seem happy about it, her clenched jaw and crossed arms clashing with the way she's sat criss-cross-applesauce on the counter.

"I am not letting you give him any of your freaky home remedy."

"It's soup."

"It's freaky soup!"

"Uh, guys?"

For some reason, Will feels a little nauseous when their heads turn in sync.

“Steve says to stop fighting or get out of his house.”

The furrow between Robin’s eyebrows gets deeper. “No he didn’t.”

“I’m sure he did,” Jonathan says, “Why don’t you go sit with him while I cook?”

“Yeah, I’ll go tell him you’re trying to poison him,” Robin says, hopping off the counter.

Jonathan rolls his eyes. Robin gives Will a small smile as she passes, which feels vaguely threatening even though he’s pretty sure she didn’t intend for it to be.

“That does smell kinda weird,” Will observes.

“Steve said he can’t taste much of anything right now anyway,” Jonathan says. He picks up a colander full of chopped carrots mixed with some other green stuff Will doesn’t recognize, and gently pours it all into the pot. “It’s chicken soup. Well, it’s gonna be. The garlic and ginger are done sweating, so now I’m putting the herbs in. I’m just working with whatever Steve had in his fridge, but it should be a lot like what I made for you when you first got back.”

Jonathan’s talked about food sweating a couple of times before. Will doesn’t really get it.

“Does ginger usually go in chicken soup?”

Jonathan shrugs, stirring the pot with a wooden spoon. “Not really, at least not in, like, Campbell’s. Maybe people do it a lot in homemade soup, I don’t know. Steve’s really congested, and unlike you he can handle a bit of spice—”

“Wh— I can handle spice!”

Jonathan snorts. “Yeah, salt and pepper.”

Will glances back at the living room, where Steve’s blanket-laden form is just barely visible over Robin’s shoulder. Ugh. Hopefully she isn’t holding his hand or anything. Robin doesn’t seem like the most nurturing person, though, so maybe there’s nothing to worry about.

No way she'd ride a stallion through a rainstorm to reach the nearest outpost and spend the last of her money on medicine for Steve, or risk a dishonorable discharge to steal supplies from the medical tent when all of the doctors and nurses said Steve was a lost cause.

It sounds like the pot's really boiling now. Maybe Will could make soup for Fake Steve sometime. He approaches the stove, bumping into Jonathan as he leans in to inspect the pot.

"So why do we want the soup to be spicy?"

Jonathan gives him a look and elbows him. "Hey, what did I say about sticking your face over the stove?"

Will blinks. "...Not to do it?"

He's not a kid, but somehow Jonathan always manages to make him feel like one. It's unfair. Nobody should be able to make Will feel so small after everything he's lived through, now that he's going into high school, but Jonathan just does it without even trying. They're the same height, now, and yet Will still has the urge to get on his tip-toes.

Jonathan pats Will's shoulder. "Get back, I'm about to get the chicken out of the oven."

"Can I help?"

Jonathan grabs an oven mitt and opens the door. "Sure. Move that potholder somewhere I'll have space to put this down."

The potholder is already in a big enough space, Will thinks, but he slides it a couple of inches to the right anyway.

"Thanks," Jonathan says. "You can wash those cutting boards while I shred the chicken, if you want."

Will washes the cutting boards. It takes awhile for the water to heat up, time that Will spends repeatedly smelling the Harringtons' fancy scented dish soap until he can't smell anything else. Then the water's hot, and Will scrubs the cutting boards over and over, unsure when to consider them clean. They work for a few minutes until Will can't

stand the silence.

“I always thought you cooked the chicken in the soup.”

“Hm?”

“You made it in the oven.”

“Oh,” Jonathan says. “Right. They already had chicken stock, so I didn’t have to. I could have, I guess, but it would have taken longer than just fixing it in the oven.”

“Oh,” Will says, still not understanding. “That makes sense.”

“It probably won’t be as good this way, but Steve said he hadn’t eaten yet today, so.” Jonathan shrugs. “Hopefully it’s decent. I’m still gonna let the chicken simmer for a little while.”

Will stops scrubbing when Jonathan dumps all of the chicken into the pot, moving out of the way so he can wash his hands.

“That’s the cleanest cutting board I’ve ever seen,” Jonathan says, nodding at where Will’s leaned it against the wall to dry.

“How do you tell?”

“Well, you sure scrubbed it long enough.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Jonathan flicks water at him before drying his hands, and Will elbows him as hard as he can.

“Ow, shit!” Jonathan rubs his side. “God, you’re bony. Eat some of this when it’s done.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Yes, Mom.”

Jonathan leans on the counter and sighs, rolling his eyes. “I’m gonna give it another ten minutes or so.”

“Oh, that’s quick.”

Jonathan shrugs. "I did most of it while you were out there with Steve."

"So..." Will trails off.

"So?"

"Speaking of when I was out there with Steve," Will says, "you were being kinda bitchy to Robin earlier."

Jonathan's head whips toward the living room and he puts a hand on Will's shoulder, like it's the mute button or something.

"I was..." Jonathan lowers his voice, glancing at the living room again before looking intently into Will's eyes. "I was not being bitchy, okay?"

Will narrows his eyes. "No, you were."

"No, I wasn't!" Jonathan raises his voice, just a bit before dropping to a near-whisper. "I just... wasn't expecting her to be here, too."

Jonathan was planning to visit Steve alone. Will had heard him on the phone, though, and asked if he could come, and Mom thought it was a great idea, and now Will's here and Jonathan's cooking and it's Robin who gets to sit with Steve and Jonathan's plans are ruined.

They would have been ruined anyway thanks to Robin. Why does Jonathan even care so much about being alone with Steve?

"Oh," Will says. It all makes sense now.

"What?"

"You're mad that I came."

Jonathan frowns. "What? No! No, Will, I—" Jonathan cuts himself off, sighing. He shakes his head, jaw clenched and turns back to the stove. "I'm not mad."

Jonathan's never mad.

One time when he was nine, Will got it into his head that Jonathan must be hiding something cool in his room, since he asked Will not to go in there if he wasn't home. So he waited until Mom had to take Jonathan to a dentist's appointment and then he went on his treasure hunt, digging through all of Jonathan's drawers and rifling through his backpack and even sticking an arm under his bed, swiping around until he hit something. It was a shoebox. He took the lid off slowly, imagined that there was a golden glow emanating from the box, wondered if it was money or comics or some key to another dimension.

There were a couple of tapes. A book called *City of Night* . Some change and one-dollar bills. A small journal that Will set aside to look through later.

Mom and Jonathan got home just as Will pulled out the magazines. He didn't even really have time to process what they were. At the sound of the front door opening, Will had quickly shoved everything back in, replaced the lid, and slid the box under the bed before ducking back into his own room and pretending to do his math homework. He thought he'd gotten away with it.

The next morning, Jonathan made Will breakfast like always, and when he set the plate down on the table their eyes met and Will knew.

He said he was sorry. Jonathan didn't say anything, just shook his head and turned back to the stove to make another slice of french toast for himself. Nothing really changed after that. Jonathan still hung out with him, still showed him new music, still told him that their dad's full of shit and Will's perfect just the way he is. It made him feel even worse. That's when he knew he could do anything, hurt Jonathan and cause problems for him and potentially make him miserable, and his brother would never say a word. He wouldn't start a fight like Nancy does when Mike goes into her room, or go tattle to their mom like Erica does when Lucas won't let her play with him. He wouldn't do anything siblings are supposed to do. He would just let it go.

Even though he's taken advantage of that particular Jonathan-ism more times than he can count, Will never snooped again. Not even

when he turned thirteen and suddenly felt like he'd die if he didn't confirm the existence of those damn magazines. It was driving him crazy, thinking maybe he just imagined them, but he couldn't bring himself to go check and see if the shoebox was still there. It wasn't worth it. At least, it's never been worth it before.

Jonathan wasn't lying about the soup being the same thing he made when Will first got back from the Upside Down. The smell of it makes Will feel guilty about being out of bed, like soon Mom is gonna come and make him lay down and tuck the blankets around him so tight he can't move. Without anything to help Jonathan with, Will hops up and takes the spot on the counter where Robin was sitting. From here, he has a good angle on Steve. His eyes are closed. Robin's slumped over on the sofa, seemingly staring at him, but her eyes could be closed too, Will supposes.

Much less exciting is his view of Jonathan. It's a view he's familiar with, the side profile and the stovetop. It's a nicer stove, yeah, and Jonathan's shoulders are more tense, but it still feels like home somehow. Like he can do or say anything and it'll be okay.

So he looks. Steve is even pretty while he's asleep, which is unfair because everybody else on the planet looks ugly or at least kind of weird while they're sleeping. But Steve looks pretty. Will can't imagine anybody prettier. Jonathan glances away from the stove, toward Steve, and Will's never been much of a mind reader but he'd bet that X-Men he won from Dustin that Jonathan is thinking the exact same thing.

Steve's eyes open. He looks straight at Robin and nowhere else, like Will and Jonathan aren't right behind her making him soup. Maybe he forgot about them. Maybe he's in love with Robin and the Byers have irredeemably shit luck like they've always had. Jonathan has been spending a lot of time with Steve, though. He knows the way around Steve's kitchen. Robin didn't seem pleased about it. Maybe she's the one with shit luck.

Will swings his legs, gently enough that he won't accidentally kick Steve's cabinets. They're probably expensive. Steve will never hold Will's hand, but he might still hold Jonathan's. Will can't risk fucking that up over something stupid.

“Sorry I butted in,” he says. His voice comes out quieter than he expected. He clears his throat. “You’ve just... been spending a lot of time with Steve lately. Just the two of you.”

Jonathan freezes. “It’s not like that.”

“Like what? I didn’t even say anything.”

“I... I just mean...”

“It’s okay.”

Jonathan turns. “What?”

“It’s...” Will trails off. “It’s okay. If you’re tired of me hanging around, or... if you want to be with Steve.”

Jonathan frowns. “Hey, you know... it doesn’t matter if I have other friends, okay? You’re still my best friend. You’re always gonna be. I mean it. I’m never gonna be tired of having you around.”

Will laughs.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, what’s funny?”

Will shakes his head, trying his best to quell the laughter bubbling up from his chest. “I know. Okay? I know you’d never, like, tell me to get out. You don’t... I’m trying to be the one comforting you, here.”

Jonathan laughs, too, though he doesn’t seem to know what’s funny. “Huh? I don’t... What are you comforting me about?”

“God, I don’t even know anymore.” Will puts his face in his hands and groans. “I’m just saying I’m sorry, alright? And I love you, and stuff.”

Within seconds, there’s a pair of arms wrapping around him, and the soup smell is stronger than ever.

“I love you too. And stuff.”

Mike was wrong, Will thinks, about them not being kids anymore. He can't imagine hugging Jonathan and feeling like anything else. It's an awkward hug, with Will sitting on the counter, but he never wants it to end. He tucks his face in Jonathan's shoulder.

"I know you like Steve," Will whispers, "I was trying to say it's okay. I'm sorry I invited myself."

"Oh, buddy," Jonathan says, "I—"

"And I'm sorry I snooped in your room that one time."

Jonathan laughs and squeezes Will's shoulders tighter. "It's okay. God, it's okay. I know you... Jesus, it's all okay, alright?"

"Yeah," Will says, because he doesn't know what else to say. He feels Jonathan's hand come up to cradle his head, and fuck, he's gonna cry right here in Steve's kitchen.

"Hey," Robin's voice calls. "Steve wants to know if you guys are okay in there."

Jonathan steps back, clearing his throat. "Uh, yeah, yeah, we're good. Soup should be about ready, actually."

He squeezes Will's shoulder. "Are you good?"

"Yeah," Will says, nodding. "Yeah, I'm hungry."

Jonathan smiles. "Give me a sec, alright?"

It's then that Robin enters the kitchen. She doesn't glare at Jonathan, which is an improvement from earlier. Maybe Steve said something to her.

"Hey, mini-Byers," she says. "Make sure he didn't toss in any poison?"

"No promises," Will says.

Robin smiles. "You ever had this stuff before?"

“Yeah, it’s good. I promise, like, actually good.”

“I believe you.”

“Hey,” Jonathan nudges Robin’s arm, “I’m gonna bring Steve his, okay?”

“Okay,” she nods. “Uh, thanks. Sorry I...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Robin chews her thumbnail before nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, alright. Thanks.”

"Will, I left you a bowl over there," Jonathan says, and Will slides off from the countertop slowly.

Robin watches Jonathan as he leaves.

"Robin, you want some?"

"Oh!" She jumps. "Uh, yeah, sure, if there's enough."

"We made plenty," Will says, and ladles some into both of the two bowls Jonathan set out, each already equipped with their own spoon. It’s so Jonathan that Will can’t help smiling as he holds a bowl out to Robin.

She takes it, leaning against the counter and blowing across the surface.

“Hey, Robin?”

“Yeah?”

"So, I, uh... I kind of just realized something."

"...Yeah?"

"I, uh... I think Jonathan wanted to come see Steve by himself today and I kinda forced my way in. I just feel bad, so I figured if you were heading out soon, I could hitch a ride on the handlebars or something? Just to let them have some alone time."

"Alone time?" Robin glances at him skeptically.

"Yeah," Will says, glancing toward the living room. Robin follows his gaze.

Jonathan is sitting on the floor next to the sofa, grinning as Steve rasps something indistinguishable. His hands linger as he passes Steve the bowl of soup, their fingers overlapping for several seconds before Jonathan slowly pulls back. A piece of hair falls in Steve's face, and Jonathan reaches out to tuck it behind his ear. Steve smiles.

Robin's eyebrows shoot up.

"Uh, not, like..." Will panics, "Not, like, in a weird way, just, like, time without me, y'know? I've been such an annoying little brother all day and I just wanted to let him, uh, hang out with people his own age. Obviously you're included in that, I just can't leave without —"

"I can give you a ride," she interrupts. Her eyes are still fixed on Steve and Jonathan.

"You... Really?"

Robin scoops up a spoonful of soup, blowing on it for just a second before putting it in her mouth. Against all odds, her eyebrows somehow manage to inch up just a big higher.

"Oh, shit, that's actually really good. You guys did a good job."

"It was all him."

"I'm sure you helped. Oh, but yeah, I can give you a ride. I honestly need to get home, I've got a lot of chores to get through. I just wanted to make sure Steve was okay."

Will can't quite read Robin's face as she watches Steve and Jonathan. It's big, whatever she's feeling, the kind of emotion that belongs on a thirty-foot theater screen more than it does in Steve's kitchen.

"You know," Will tries, "He's still your best friend. Even if he's got other people in his life."

Robin snorts. "And here I was thinking Dustin's his best friend."

"Dustin's my best friend."

"I thought that was Mike?"

"Him too. All of them." Will feels a bit like he's lying. It takes a second to realize why. "Oh, and Jonathan."

Robin finally turns away from Steve to look at Will. She's smiling. "You're a popular guy."

Will shrugs.

"We'll head out whenever you're done," Robin says, nodding to his bowl of soup. She eats another spoonful of her own, glances back to the living room, then leans in to whisper conspiratorially with Will.

"You think Steve will mind if I take some of this in his mom's Tupperware?"

Steve's hand shakes as he lifts the spoon to his mouth, and Jonathan reaches out to steady it, wrapping his own hand around Steve's. They look up from the spoon, meeting each other's eyes, and they both laugh, hands frozen like they've forgotten they're holding something entirely. Their lips move, but they must be whispering, because Will can't hear a word they're saying.

"...You know, something tells me he won't notice."

Author's Note:

hi!! so i know i've got an unfinished series right now dnkmdn but i finished this little fic that's been floating around in my head for months and figured why not post it! it's a little rough but i hope u guys like <3

as always thanks to my love sarah (steveharrington on tumblr, birthdaycandles on here) for contributing to the Will Byers' Epic Romance Fantasy Cinematic Universe (wberfcu) and being perfect in every way.

i'm @lesbianrobin on tumblr if u wanna chat!!